

VZCZCXRO2920
PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #1601/01 1461420
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 251420Z MAY 08
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7521
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 06 BAGHDAD 001601

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/24/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: IRANIAN-BACKED PARTIES PREPARED TO DOMINATE
UPCOMING PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS IN MUTHANNA

REF: A. NSAR 2007-13HC OF 24 MAR 2008
[1](#)B. DIA S-1
[1](#)C. 484/08/CCO-4 OF 3 JAN 2008
[1](#)D. MND(SE) J2 - WEEKLY INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT OF
23-30 OCT 04
[1](#)E. IIR 7 921 0591 06
[1](#)F. MND(SE) ICOD OF 102359ZMAR05
[1](#)G. "POST-ELECTION REGIONAL INFLUENCES IN SOUTHEAST
IRAQ"
[1](#)H. MNC-I "COUNTER-IRANIAN INFLUENCE BRIEF" OF 10
FEB 2008
[1](#)I. MNF-I CIOC
[1](#)J. "BADR ORGANIZATION RELIANCE ON IRANIAN INFLUENCE
IN SOUTHERN IRAQ REGION" OF 25 DEC 2006
[1](#)K. DIA IIR 7 921 1317 05
[1](#)L. "MUTHANNA PROVINCE GOVERNOR'S ACTIVITIES ON
BEHALF OF IRANIAN INTELLIGENCE" OF 27
APR 2005
[1](#)M. 2008 BAGHDAD 1388
[1](#)N. 2008 BAGHDAD 699
[1](#)O. 2008 BAGHDAD 1432
[1](#)P. 2008 BAGHDAD 1422
[1](#)Q. 2008 BASRAH 41
[1](#)R. 2008 BAGHDAD 898
[1](#)S. TD-314/81495-07
[1](#)T. 2008 BAGHDAD 8
[1](#)U. 2007 BAGHDAD 4146
[1](#)V. IIR 7 921 0477 06
[1](#)W. IIR 7 921 0604 06

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) This is a PRT Muthanna reporting cable.

[1](#)2. (S) SUMMARY: The failure of the Shiite religious parties since 2005 to improve the daily lives of average Iraqis has left many Shia disillusioned. In Muthanna, nationalist, tribal, technocratic, and secular groups are coalescing to offer a political alternative. Despite the groundswell of support for such alternatives, these new tribal and technocrat groups face formidable obstacles. Iran used both direct and indirect influence in the 2005 provincial elections to ensure the dominance of the Shiite religious parties in Muthanna, and it is positioned to do so again in [1](#)2008. Tehran helped the religious parties buy votes and dominate the airwaves in 2005, while simultaneously bringing delegations of sheikhs to Iran where it plied them with money and gifts in order to develop agents of influence. The Shiite religious parties are trying to counter the threat posed by the independents by moving aggressively to co-opt them and by cloaking their own 2008 lists in independent guise. The current electoral landscape is extremely fluid. But once the party lists solidify and the campaign begins in earnest, many Muthanna observers fear a season of assassinations and violence will begin. The stakes in the upcoming election are high. The religious parties do not represent the south's varied communities and are resented by much of the public; if these parties remain in power, disenfranchised groups will lose their faith in the political process, increasing the divide between the people and the

government and hindering reconciliation efforts. ISCI control of provincial councils and governorships across southern Iraq would set the stage for efforts to create a nine-province southern region that could fall increasingly under Iranian influence. Both possibilities have the potential to unleash an escalating cycle of violence and further destabilize the country. END SUMMARY.

2005 ELECTION: CAKEWALK FOR IRAN

13. (S/REL UK, AUS) Iran's objective in the 2005 provincial elections was to ensure the dominance of the Shiite religious parties on the 555 United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) list. These parties, especially the Islamic Supreme Council in Iraq (ISCI) and its militant wing the Badr Organization, included the most reliable individual Iranian proxies and those susceptible to strong Iranian influence from their longtime relationships with Iranian politicians, security, and intelligence officials developed while in exile in Iran for over two decades (see reporting in REFS A, B, and C). The outpouring of Shiite religiosity that followed the collapse of the former regime, as well as the religious parties' exploitation of the sanction of the Marja'iyya, the traditional Shiite clerical hierarchy led by Grand Ayatollah Sistani, ensured that Iran's objective was easily achieved. A banner hung in central Rumaytha outside the local office of Sistani's representative read, "Those who do not vote for the 555 Alliance are terrorists, Ba'thists, takfiris, or al-Qaeda. Be an Iraqi and a Muslim and vote 555." This message was repeated across the country in accordance with what the Shiite population understood was a fatwa from the

BAGHDAD 00001601 002 OF 006

Marja'iyya stating that a vote for a list other than 555/UIA was a "wrong vote and made one an unbeliever."

TRIBES, BRIBES, AND FRAUD

14. (S/REL UK, AUS) According to accounts of current Muthanna Provincial Council members, as well as several tribal sheikhs directly involved in 2005 elections campaigns, tribes were the largest constituency that the Shiite religious parties rode to power in Muthanna, Dhi Qar, Maysan, Basrah, Najaf, and Diwaniya. Tribal sheikhs who could deliver the votes of their tribesmen advertised that their votes were "For Sale," while also placing some of their "tribal sons" on party lists. In Muthanna, for example, the senior sheikhs of the Duwalim tribe chose Fadhil Mehelhel to run on the ISCI/Badr list; Raysaan Mutasher joined the ISCI/Badr list from the Zayad tribe. In exchange, these opportunistic candidates, as well as the leading sheikhs of their tribes, received thousands of dollars in personal gifts, and tens of thousands of dollars with which to hold campaign events and pay bribes to local leaders and ordinary citizens. Multiple contacts corroborate that ISCI/Badr paid many of Muthanna's most influential tribal leaders to "campaign" for them in this way, including Sheikhs Abu Chefat (Albu Hassan tribe), Falih Hadi (Juwabir tribe), Ali al-Hajja Aja (Albu Jayash tribe), Sahib Finjan (Sufuran), and Najih Kamil (Duwalim tribe).

15. (S/REL UK, AUS) Some bribes were paid in cash, others were in kind. One illustrative instance occurred in 2005 and is famous among the citizens of Rumaytha. Ammar al-Hakim visited the city in 2005 and held a meeting for the "Women of ISCI." The wife of Governor Muhammad Ali al-Hassani's cousin Issa gathered women from all over the Albu Hassan tribal area and bused them to the ISCI office in Rumaytha, where Ammar regaled them on the benefits that ISCI would deliver and directed them to assist ISCI in the campaign. He then distributed 300 mobile phones to the audience, fully paid for and loaded with credit. At a time when mobile phones were still new in Muthanna, such a gift was "impossible to forget," a well-informed local resident asserted.

¶6. (S) Electoral fraud was also a major component of the Shiite religious parties' victory. Multiple contacts, as well as PRT local staff who were polling station employees, detailed the following laundry list of vote-rigging measures that they observed first-hand. The vast majority of polling station directors and employees in 2005 were loyalists picked by the various religious parties. (Comment: For further reporting on party infiltration of election staff, see REF D. End Comment.) These employees forged ballots in the name of local residents who did not appear to vote. They disqualified ballots for lists other than their own by adding an extra check mark after submission. Illiterate voters who asked to vote for one list, were tricked into marking the box of another. Voters planning to support the "correct" list were allowed to turn in ballots for dozens of their "dependent family members," despite being unable to produce their identity cards as regulations required, while others making the "wrong" choice received no such dispensation. All told, these measures produced results wildly disproportionate to the actual turnout. In rural areas of Muthanna, local observers and employees estimated that 10 percent of the population turned out to vote, whereas the official count recorded that 85 percent of the population eligible to vote had in fact voted for 555.

AGENTS OF IRANIAN INFLUENCE

¶7. (S/REL UK, AUS) Iran's influence on the 2005 elections was both direct and indirect. Indirectly, they provided millions of dollars of the funding that parties like ISCI/Badr used to buy votes and dominate the airwaves, according to a body of sensitive intelligence (REFS A, B, E, F, and G). Their direct influence was most apparent in the trips to Iran that they sponsored for delegations of sheikhs in the lead-up to the December voting. In August and September of 2005, Governor Muhammad Ali al-Hassani of Muthanna, who spent over two decades in Iran as a Badr Corps commander and worked there under the tutelage of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS), organized a delegation of 22 of Muthanna's top sheikhs to travel to Iran under the auspices of an all-expense paid visit to the Imam Ridha shrine. Multiple contacts confirm the essential format of the trip. Over the course of trips to Mashhad, Qum, and Tehran "there were constant lectures by Iranian imams and intelligence personnel upon the importance of resisting American ideas such as secularism," one Albu Hassan sheikh revealed. The purpose was "to brainwash Iraqis to think that anyone who worked with the Americans was a Ba'thist or a traitor." A Juwabir sheikh added, "The delegation was fed

BAGHDAD 00001601 003 OF 006

the line that the Shia must be united and must protect their interests against the Sunna." Both contacts confirm that during the trip the sheikhs were plied with "money and gifts in the name of the Supreme Leader (Grand Ayatollah Khamenei)." The delegation returned home loaded down with lavish rugs and furnishings for their homes and mudhifs, and they made "expensive purchases upon their return that would have been beyond their means before they left." (Comment: These details are consistent with other intelligence and open source reporting on such trips. For Hassani's ties to MOIS, see also REF H. End Comment.)

¶8. (S/REL UK, AUS) Once back in Iraq, support for Iranian-backed parties was rewarded even more lucratively. The Juwabir sheikh continued, "Those who returned and supported the ISCI/Badr campaign got government favors, facilitated at the Muthanna level principally by Governor Hassani. For example, Sheikh Falih Hadi (Juwabir tribe) got to pick 20 of his tribesmen for jobs in the Iraq Police. And the government agreed to perform road and electricity projects in his area. The message from the Iranian Itila'at (MOIS) personnel in Iran was, 'You need to elect our slate, and if you do ISCI/Badr will answer your dreams. If they don't, then come to us and we'll make sure you get what you

deserve." Evidence from multiple sources confirms that such trips to Iran were designed to groom tribal leaders to be conduits of Iranian influence during the elections and to assess which sheikhs were open to becoming more durable agents of Iranian intelligence in the province. One Albu Hassan sheikh summarized, "The Iranians are willing to ship hundreds of sheikhs to Iran even if only a handful can be groomed to become lasting agents for Itila'at. That is why the Iranians are winning and you Americans are losing."

LEAD-UP TO 2008: DISILLUSIONMENT AND OPPORTUNITY

¶9. (S/REL UK, AUS) The profound failure of the Shiite religious parties that dominate the national and provincial governments to improve the daily lives of average Iraqis has left the Shiite population of Iraq deeply disillusioned. Colonel Ali al-Khawam, commander of the Criminal Intelligence Unit in Muthanna, voiced this seemingly universal sentiment in a recent meeting with the PRT: "People hate the religious parties now. They voted in 2005 because of a fatwa from the Marja'iyya to support the Shia. Now they curse their choice and they want the turbans (clerics) out." Atmospheric reporting from all over southern Iraq confirms a decline in mosque attendance and popular religiosity since 2006, and a newfound willingness to rail publicly against "the imamas" (turbaned clerics). Fed up with sectarianism, corruption, and the deterioration in their quality of life, people hunger for an honest, secular, nationalist alternative to the parties in power. Before August 2007, the Sadrists were well-positioned to capitalize on this disenchantment with the ruling parties. However, the Shabaniya violence in Karbala and its aftermath has weakened and discredited them. This has opened up space in the political landscape for independent parties and candidates, and they are springing up all over the nine southern provinces.

¶10. (S/REL UK, AUS) Nationalist, tribal, technocratic, and secular political alternatives are emerging in Muthanna. There are at least three tribal coalitions that span the major tribes of the province and seek to compete in the upcoming election. One is led by Sheikhs Najim Abed Sayah (aka Abu Chefat) (Albu Hassan tribe) and Najih Kamil Ghetheeth (Duwalim tribe) and is currently registering under the name "Sons of the Two Euphrates." The leaders describe it as a "secular, nationalist, and independent list" that will have a mixture of tribal and urban professional candidates (REF I). A second group is led by two brothers from the Burkat tribe, Hakim Khazal and Sheikh Fahim Khazal. The third group has coalesced around Sheikh Talib Aziz of the Juwabir tribe and has strong links with Ahmed Abu Risha and "Sahwat al-Iraq." All three groups declare themselves to be secular, nationalist, and non-sectarian and to have an agenda that rejects regions formation and Iranian influence. They all claim the mantle of the "Shia Awakening" and are currently building networks of contacts with Sunni and Shiite sheikhs in other provinces.

¶11. (S/REL UK, AUS) There are numerous smaller groupings with more localized tribal support. For example, current PC member Kareem Ali Sajet who was elected in 2005 on the Fadhila ticket is now preparing a list with candidates from the Ghanim, Sufran, and Burkat tribes. A Warka City Council member named Sayyid Yasir al-Yasiri is forming a list that includes support from the Duwalim, Zayad, Sufran, and Ghanim tribes, along with urban constituencies in Samawa. This entity is being funded by two brothers who are wealthy Muthanna contractors, a novel campaign finance phenomenon in

BAGHDAD 00001601 004 OF 006

Muthanna. Thirdly, a prominent Bani Zraige sheikh, Abdulillah al-Khawam, is forming a list composed entirely of fellow tribesmen. Besides opposition to the religious parties and the status quo, the platforms of these parties remain ill-defined. Finally, the Arab League appears to be cooperating with Bani Zraige sheikh and wealthy businessman

Adnan al-Khawam to organize another nationalistic and anti-Iranian coalition. Former Arab League representative to Iraq, Ahmed bin Hilli, stated their goal: "We must remind Iraqis that they are first Arabs, and then above that, Iraqis." Sheikh Adnan then said to a PRT contact, "The Iranians are sending sheikhs to Mashhad? OK, I'll send twelve sheikhs to Mecca!"

¶12. (S) Independent technocrats are also emerging and coalescing into electoral slates. A group called the "Samawa Parliament" has reconstituted itself after a failed election bid in 2005 and now includes secular-minded doctors, lawyers, engineers, and professors representing a cross-section of Muthanna's professional class. There are many similar initiatives in the rest of the southern provinces (for example, REFS J, K, L, and M). But such groups usually lack the funding to be truly viable. Mayor Majed al-Yasiri (strictly protect), one of Muthanna's most honest and well-respected technocratic officials, explained, "There are plenty of very well-qualified individuals who want to run, and who would do great service for the province. But they are caught between the established national parties and the tribal lists. They feel that carving a third way is hopeless. Maybe they'll run on other lists out of necessity.

Or maybe they'll not run. But there is no question that a technocratic list would solve the province's problems." Majed has the ambition to run, but is not willing to sell himself to an existing party to do so. One of his cousins who is in ISCI/Badr offered to finance his campaign in exchange for his agreement to vote ISCI's way on key issues once in power. Majed rejected this, replying, "I can't follow orders. I won't even vote for a governor I don't believe in." When asked what he would need to run a viable campaign Majed replied, "If there were support that was not tribal, and not a party, and the goal was noble, I would form my own list and run. I would need to pay the registration fee, cars for campaign travel, media coverage, mass printing capability for handbills, and money to pay for lunches, dinners, and 'gifts.' It is possible for a few honest, independent candidates to get votes without bribing people if the populace sees something special in them. However, chances are people will need to be on a list with others who will do the dirty work needed to win large amounts of votes."

"DO YOU THINK THEY WILL LET THEMSELVES LOSE?"

¶13. (S) Despite the groundswell of support for political alternatives to the Shiite religious parties, these new tribal and technocratic groups face formidable obstacles in attempting to unseat those in power. As Colonel Ali al-Khawam (strictly protect), one the south's most effective police commanders, commented wryly, "The people are poor. They can still be bought. The outcome will be the same parties as in 2005. What? Are you surprised? They control the government. Do you think they will let themselves lose?"

¶14. (S/REL UK, AUS) Of all the religious parties, ISCI/Badr has been the most adept at consolidating its hold on power in the south. Badr commander Muhammad Ali al-Hassani's tenure as Governor of Muthanna illustrates this phenomenon. From the time he was elected in 2005, Hassani systematically replaced provincial security officials and ministerial directors general with individuals beholden to him (REF H). His grip over the Directors General of Water, Electricity, Irrigation, Cement, Roads and Bridges, Municipalities, Housing, Welfare, Pipelines, and Justice gave him near total control over the organs of government patronage. Multiple local officials also described to the PRT how Hassani used five percent of the funds allocated to the Provincial Council for "Regional Development" to hire 1,000 employees from tribes he wished to cultivate. These employees supposedly worked on reconstruction projects, but in reality only collected a paycheck. When Ahmed Marzook took over as governor after Hassani's assassination, he canceled the earlier contracts and hired a fresh 1,000 so they would be indebted to him personally.

¶15. (S) The religious parties are also able to bring national power to bear on the provincial political landscape. Examples of this include Prime Minister Maliki's cooperation with ISCI/Badr in the last two months to crush their Sadrist opponents militarily and politically. Major security operations in Baghdad and throughout southern Iraq have been combined with tribal levies into the Iraqi Army, including

BAGHDAD 00001601 005 OF 006

800 tribesmen recruited and vetted from Muthanna by the local Hezb al-Da'wa leadership. And, according to reporting from across the south, as well as contacts with personal and professional relationships with Muthanna's Governorate Election Officer (GEO), the religious parties have put the provincial GEOs under intense pressure to hire their own party loyalists as election staff, just as occurred in 2005 (REF N).

A SHELL GAME

¶16. (S) The Shiite religious parties are also trying to counter the threat posed to them by independents by moving aggressively to co-opt them from the start. Sheikh Abu Chefat described the following incident: "Najih Kamil Ghetheeth (co-founder of the "Sons of the Two Euphrates" list) told me that a Jafari representative offered him money to collect tribal votes for Jafari's party. He was offered \$30,000 and a car for himself. And he would be authorized to spend money on bribes on behalf of the campaign. Some people would get cash, some cars, some would get projects." Abu Chefat continued, "Another man came to me and said, 'I heard you were forming a political bloc. Would you allow me to pay the 25 million Iraqi dinar for your registration fee? I belong to Fadhila, but do not say you belong to Fadhila. Stay independent. Your campaign will be all paid for. All you have to do is sign a deal that if your people are elected they will vote for and support Fadhila policies.'"

¶17. (S) Multiple local sources corroborate that Badr boss Hadi al-Amiri has also met with Abu Chefat. Abu Chefat himself stated, "The Iranians (he later clarified that he meant Badr) offered me a 2008 Nissan double-cab pickup truck. They said, 'We want you to be able to reach rural areas and your current car cannot. Give us your jinsiya (identity card) and we'll return it to you with the double-cab pickup registered in your name. All you have to do is have your independent list endorse Lateef al-Hassani (brother of the late Governor Hassani) as the top ISCI/Badr candidate.' I said 'No' to the Nissan, but if they offer me two? One for me, one for my son? How long can I say no? That's what we're waiting for the Americans to rescue us from."

"WOLVES IN INDEPENDENT CLOTHING"

¶18. (S) The incumbent religious parties realize that in the current climate of disillusionment they may have to cloak their 2008 lists in independent guise. Local Muthanna contacts report that Fadhila and Da'wa Tanzhim are approaching individuals planning to run on pre-existing lists and "renting" them for the party by paying for their campaigns. Hezb al-Da'wa al-Islamiya will likely use at least one independent list as a shell in Muthanna, while fielding candidates on an official list in parallel. And ISCI/Badr intends to build its strategy around the late Governor Hassani's brother Lateef, who Abdulaziz al-Hakim has anointed as the heir-apparent to the ISCI leadership mantle and the governorship in the province. According to Mayor Majed, "The ISCI/Badr leadership in Baghdad understands that their incumbents on the PC are tainted. They will be cast aside. Orders have come down that Lateef will register to run on a list that is publicly independent and unaligned with the official ISCI list. They are looking for fresh faces to run alongside Lateef." Majed added that "for now, it seems

that the Sadrists will not run under their own name, but on so-called independent lists." One PRT local contact quipped, "Our ballot will be filled with wolves in independent clothing."

IRANIAN PREEMPTION

¶19. (S/REL UK, AUS) Early in the days of the "Sahwat al-Iraq" movement, Iran recognized the potential threat posed by a broader cross-sectarian "Awakening" and it moved cleverly to preempt its development. Sensitive reporting indicates that Iranian officials urged the leadership of the GOI to prevent the spread of such movements among Shi'a communities in southern Iraq and to contain existing U.S. efforts. Meanwhile, Iran ramped up its own efforts to cultivate Shiite tribal leaders and independents (REF O). Beginning in November 2007, Iran expanded its "Ridha trip" program to include a series of high profile initiatives in which it shipped dozens of sheikhs from Wasit, Maysan, and Basrah across the border. Open source and sensitive reporting confirms that Iranian intelligence personnel plied the delegations with money, gifts, and promises of future largesse, just as in the build-up to the 2005 elections (REFS P and Q). The program expanded to Muthanna and other non-border provinces in January 2008. Local contacts confirm

BAGHDAD 00001601 006 OF 006

that at least six separate tribal delegations from Muthanna have traveled to Iran since then, with each delegation numbering more than a dozen. The aim of these efforts may be to buy a base of electoral support for the religious parties and to seed the rest of the field with independents who will act as Iranian proxies.

¶20. (S) The current electoral landscape is extremely fluid, and it will remain so for the next one to two months. Colonel Ali cautioned, "Now is the time for money, influence, and promises." One's competitors can still become allies. But once the party lists solidify and the candidates begin to campaign in earnest, "We will enter the season of assassinations and violence." Mayor Majed put the stakes of the elections in perspective: "Iranian money and influence is a 100 percent certainty in this contest because the winners will have the next four years to decide the key debates that will determine the future of Iraq." Faced with this reality, the Sadrists will be prone to violence given their conviction that Maliki and ISCI/Badr are out to deny them a fair shot at the polls. PRT local contacts insist that the other Shiite religious parties, not to mention Iran, will engage in violence as well. One prominent provincial official stated, "Any political party currently in Iraq could become JAM (Jaysh al-Mehdi). Tomorrow, if ISCI were not in power, they would begin the same insurgent and assassination campaigns." Colonel Ali regards it as "a certainty" that ISCI/Badr and Iran will engage in a national, targeted assassination campaign against Sadrists and independents. "They are entirely unscrupulous," he remarked. "This would be easy and natural for them." The only factor that restrains Iran, Colonel Ali believes, is the risk of exposure of their activities. "As a country beset on all sides by accusations of predatory actions, Iran's highest priority is hiding any evidence. The real dagger to Iran's heart is public evidence of their foul-play." (Comment: For additional intelligence reporting on Badr and Iranian assassination plans and activities in the lead-up to 2005 elections, see REF D, G, R, and S. End Comment.)

COMMENT

¶21. (S) We can reasonably assume that what is occurring in Muthanna is happening throughout the south. Iranian-backed parties and individuals are poised to win provincial elections in Shiite-majority areas of Iraq through vote-buying, campaign fraud, co-option of independents,

intimidation, and violence. ISCI/Badr is by no means the only conduit and benefactor of Iranian influence, but it is the principal one in Muthanna by virtue of its dominance of the provincial political landscape. If movements representing the disillusioned and disenfranchised Shiite populace are unable to coalesce into more organized, province-spanning entities with a funding base, they will likely be derailed by the well-organized efforts of the Shiite religious parties and Iran to maintain and consolidate their power in the province. The stakes of this contest are enormous. The religious parties do not represent the south's varied communities and are resented by much of the public; if these parties remain in power, disenfranchised groups will lose their faith in the political process, increasing the divide between the people and the government and hindering reconciliation efforts. ISCI control of provincial councils and governorships across southern Iraq could set the stage for efforts to create a nine-province southern region that would fall increasingly under Iranian influence. This could trigger competing referenda as other Shiite groups react with their own plans for region formation. Both possibilities have the potential to unleash an escalating cycle of violence that would further destabilize the country.

CROCKER